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ABSTRACT

In fiscal 1973, Ohio elected to concentrate training for staff in adult basic education (ABE) in eight cities. A review of records indicated that 143 ABE teachers in 5 of those cities attended 1 to 4 workshops that year. This study sought to answer three questions about these teachers: their long-term (7 years or more) retention in adult education; reasons for leaving the program for those who did; and the impact of ABE staff development on persons still teaching in public school but no longer in ABE. Through directors of ABE programs in 5 cities, it was found that 45 persons remained active after 7 years; of those who left the program, 71.5 percent (70) did so immediately or in the 2 years following the inservice training. Most of these who had left ABE had taken full time employment in elementary or secondary education, while 28 percent had left education entirely. Personal reasons accounted for the rest of the group of leavers. Through interviews with 12 persons still in ABE and 8 who had left, it was determined that statewide or regional programs of inservice education had more effect on their development than local programs. The researchers concluded that few conclusions about cause and effect could be drawn about the impact of inservice education, but that the whole ABE system should be viewed as a "loosely coupled system" before the impact of inservice education can become strong, important, and more immediately related to practice. (KC)

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A Modest Assessment of the Impact of Inservice
Education in ABE

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Probably the most distinguishing purpose of in-service education is not merely to provide information but to assist learners to interpret it, to organize it, to employ it in the making of decisions and the taking of action. This is also its greatest test. According to Knox (1979) evaluating the impact of education means going beyond measures of satisfaction and learning gain, to assessment of practical application in terms of changed performance and societal benefits. However, while we would like to have proof of impact, we usually have to settle for evidence of likely impact. Concerning continuing education for the professions Houle (1980) poses several tough questions. How much of the knowledge, ability, or sensitiveness that the activity was designed to convey has been fully absorbed into the understanding and practice of the learners? How rigorously and how well do they continue to use that competence as part of their practice? How readily and frequently do they continue to build on what they know? Answers to these questions, Houle observes, have so far been discouraging because efforts at teaching and learning seem to have had all too little effect upon practice.

For adult basic education the gap between the content presented through in-service education and its utilization in practice is intensified by the largely unsystematized nature of the whole enterprise. Many qualities identified by Kleis (1971) a decade ago still pertain today. He described adult basic education as varying widely in terms of both scope and content and existing largely on the basis of ad hoc arrangements in local schools and other institutions. Its workers have typically been trained for other tasks; few give full time to it; most work at it without effective contact

with professional colleagues and without an adequate body of proven principle. Practice is largely guided by folk wisdom, derived from trial and error, or borrowed from other fields of education. While a decade or more of in-service education for ABE practitioners has mitigated the effects of some of these problems, ABE remains today the antithesis of a tightly organized or "rationalistic" model of education in which as Corwin (1975) notes, goals are clear-cut and understood and subscribed to by all; activities are planned and closely coordinated; necessary information is available for making informed decisions necessary to achieve the goals; and there is sufficient control over the organization to ensure compliance with long-run plans. Given this disparity, is it any wonder that evidence of impact from in-service education for practitioners in ABE has been elusive. Hentschel's (1977) conclusion that the literature reveals very few evaluations of impact of in-service education programs in general is true of ABE in particular.

In fiscal 1973, Ohio elected to concentrate training for staff in 8 major cities: Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown. The decision was made because an estimated 85 percent of the ABE students and staff were located in these eight cities. Two consortia were formed. The northern cities of Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Toledo and Youngstown entered into a consortium arrangement and held four joining workshops that year. Columbus, Cincinnati, and Dayton acted as a separate consortium with separate activities.

A review of records maintained during FY73 indicated that a total of 143 ABE teachers and teacher aides from the five northern cities attended one or more of the four workshops scheduled during FY73. We sought to answer three questions about these teachers:

1) To determine the long term (7 years) retention of staff in adult education in the five northern major cities, 2) to determine the reasons for leaving the program, and 3) to assess the impact of ABE staff development on persons still teaching in public schools but no longer employed in adult basic education. To achieve our purposes we followed the plan described below.

Staff longevity

Directors of ABE programs in the five major cities were provided with a list of names of their staff members who had participated in consortium sponsored in-service activities in FY73, and asked to identify those who were still active in the program. For those no longer active, directors were requested to determine how many years each staff member had remained with the program, and the reason for termination.

Forty-five persons or 31.5 percent of the total, remained active after 7 years. Of those who left the program 71.5 percent (70) did so immediately or in the two years following. Only 28 percent or 28 left in the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th years following. Hence, while nearly all staff members in the northern consortium attended at least one workshop and 30 percent attended 3 or 4 workshops, nearly two-thirds were no longer in ABE two years later.

Reason for separation

Of the original pool of workshop participants 68.5 percent (98) were no longer with ABE after 7 years. Of these nearly 46 percent had left ABE to take full-time employment in elementary or secondary education; 28 percent had left education entirely; for 16 percent death, illness or retirement were reasons for separation from ABE; the remaining 10 percent left for family reasons, or to go back to school, or because they were not offered a new contract. A very small number observed that ABE had become routine and offered no new challenges.

Impact of staff development

In an effort to determine the impact of staff development on those staff members still in ABE, and those who had left ABE but were still teaching in elementary or secondary schools, interviews were conducted with 20 randomly selected respondents at sites convenient for those to be interviewed. Respondents still employed in adult basic education as well as those who left sometime between 1973 and 1980 were asked to describe their responsibilities in the program and any changes which had occurred. Concerning consortium sponsored staff development opportunities, respondents were invited to describe the topics or content of such sessions, the speakers or resource persons present, and the ideas gained which were most helpful in their work. Next the interviewer asked them to comment on further learning experiences related to the job undertaken on their own initiative and the reasons for doing so. Respondents were invited to offer suggestions for future use of staff development funds. They were asked to describe the impact of ABE experience on themselves personally. Finally, respondents no longer employed in ABE were asked to assess the impact of the ABE experience, and staff development specifically, on their present employment as well as their reasons for leaving ABE.

Respondents still in adult basic education

Interviews with the 12 persons still in ABE after seven years indentified roughly two levels of impact. There were those on whom the staff development experience left a clear imprint. Four persons were found in this category. These persons can be described as having experienced dramatic changes in their careers. The changes were in the condition of their employment, the nature of their responsibilities and the degree of their

involvement with, and dedication to the program. Concerning the conditions of employment and the nature of responsibilities, all four moved from part-time to full-time employment and from teaching or recruiting to roles combining teaching and administration. Concerning involvement and dedication all four moved from being relative novices in the field to acknowledged resource persons sought out by peers and by state department of education supervisors for their expertise, and respected for their commitment and contribution to ABE.

To a greater degree than other respondents still in ABE, the "dramatic change" staff members were also able to recall specific topics, speakers, places, and content in staff development activities offered since 1973.

These persons became and remain highly-motivated to learn and improve their competence as practitioners. In addition to participating in staff development activities provided through the consortium, these persons sought to improve themselves professionally through credit courses in institutions of higher education, workshops in areas related to adult education, by attending lectures and other programs, and by participating in professional association, civic and church groups and independent reading.

The impact of the ABE experience on these staff members personally can be recognized in the affective domain. They commented on their growth in such areas as confidence, security, sensitivity, and conscientiousness. Frequent references were made to their becoming more accepting and less judgemental, being able to more clearly identify priorities in their work and their lives, and in developing a greater sense of community.

The remaining 8 persons still active in ABE evidenced a less dramatic level of impact on their work from staff development experience in general affective terms. While they still expressed very positive opinions about their work, several differences were noted between them and those for whom

results were more dramatic. First, as a group they were less able to recall specifics concerning staff development sessions such as content, resource persons even places where such were held. Those with responsibility for special areas such as math instruction, or teaching English as a second language were able to cite some instances in which these topics were addressed and the sessions were found to be valuable. Second, few of this group have moved into supervisory and administrative ranks. Several have remained in part-time classroom teaching, and most noted no changes in their professional responsibility over a seven year period. Third, this group identified very limited self-initiated learning activities undertaken to enhance professional competence.

On the other hand, these persons tended to credit ABE and specifically the staff development experience with contributing to their empathy for adults as learners, and for helping them appreciate the causes and results of poverty. In general they were particularly appreciative of activities which gave them ideas and materials which they were able to take home and use in the classroom, though most were unable to provide specific examples.

Respondents no longer in adult basic education

Interviews were also conducted with 8 persons not employed in ABE but still active in the education profession as teachers or administrators in elementary or secondary schools. The impact of the ABE experience and staff development specifically on these respondents showed no marked contrast to those 8 staff members still in the program, but who had not experienced dramatic changes. The effects of in-service education they cited were chiefly in the affective domain with specifics recalled regarding content and resource persons.

Concerning the relationship between their ABE experience and training and their present position, two of the former staff members said that ABE

and staff development had no application to their current public school responsibility. The remaining 6 cited a carryover of empathy for the learner, greater understanding of the influences of poverty, and a heightened regard for motivation of students with whom they had worked in adult education.

Summary and conclusions

Of the 143 staff who participated in ABE in-service activities seven years ago, 45 are still active in the program. This retention of 31.5 percent over seven years, in a program which usually offers part-time employment and hourly wages as opposed to an annual contract, may be regarded as favorable. At the same time, however, training dollars invested in those no longer part of program must be viewed as having a low return.

Separation of staff from the program tends to occur within the first few years. Those who remain with the program beyond two years show the greatest promise for long-term retention. Perhaps only then is an extensive staff development program warranted.

Staff development activities are often designed around subject centered (cognitive) areas. Of the four workshops conducted in 1973, for instance, three focused on specifics of reading, the use of specific testing instruments, and how to teach mathematics. Yet the long term benefits derived from staff development for the most of the respondents could best be described as increased sensitiveness to the learner and to the teacher behaviors needed for successful interaction with ABE clients.

Respondents experiencing a dramatic level of change over seven years in ABE repeatedly commented on the advantages on in-state regional or consortium sponsored staff development functions over those conducted by individual local programs. Advantages cited included a sense of identity with a movement and a program larger than what is experienced in the local

setting; an identity with a profession; opportunities to confer with colleagues, exchange experiences, and be inspired by the dedication of others; a chance to achieve recognition and visibility for one's competence; renewed commitment and vigor for the task. Staff whose training and learning have been largely the result of local opportunities seldom experienced these outcomes. As a result, there emerges a feeling of drudgery and boredom often associated with in-service programs in local school systems.

Causality is of course, extremely elusive. It's impossible to directly attribute the dramatic changes in some respondents' ABE careers to in-service education. Such changes may just as well be explained by a shift in responsibility or conditions of employment or personality attributes. However, the level of awareness of ideas and resource people contained in the 1973 in-service activities was clearly higher for these persons than for any other respondents.

Weick's (1976) notion of "loosely coupled systems" seems to be extremely appropriate for understanding the organizational system that is adult basic education and the contribution of in-service education to the work of its practitioners. The concept implies that the elements of the system are not necessarily rationally or tightly related. The term conveys the image that coupled events are responsive, but that each event or component of the system also preserves its own identity and physical or logical separateness. Hence staff development activities are somehow attached to teacher performance but the attachment may be in Weick's words, "circumscribed, infrequent, weak, unimportant, and/or slow to respond". This same loose coupling may also be said to characterize the relationship of the entire ABE program to the local school district, the ABE coordinator activities to those of the teacher, the teacher-aide to those of the counselor, and so on. According to Wise (1979) the concept of loosely coupled systems helps explain why manipulating

some elements in an educational system may have no consequences for other elements. It directs attention to the possibility that the policy-making system, exercised for example in the planning of in-service activities, may be loosely coupled to the actual day-to-day work of conducting adult basic education. Perhaps, explicit recognition and discussion of the disjointedness of the entire adult basic education enterprise is required before the impact of the in-service education can become strong, important, and more immediately related to practice.

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